Testimony of

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Good afternoon. I am Gino Menchini, Commissioner of New York City's Department of Information Technology and Telecommunications, and the City's Chief Information Officer. Accompanying me today is Inspector Charles Dowd, Commanding Officer of the New York City Police Department's Communications Division. I am privileged to have the opportunity to testify before you today about public safety communications in the City of New York; to describe the interoperable systems we have put into place; and to outline the City's future needs.

Allow me to begin by saying that one of the primary challenges in designing interoperable radio systems is anticipating the many different circumstances in which interoperable communications will be required. However, this type of contingency planning is fundamental because, contrary to popular belief, interoperability cannot be achieved by simply putting thousands of emergency responders onto the same radio channel.

The shortcomings of such an approach mirror limitations associated with telecom voice traffic, generally. For example, just as it would create havoc to have thousands of participants on a single telephone conference bridge, so too would essential radio communications become jumbled and lost, with too many responders talking at the same time, on the same channel.

To do their jobs effectively – and safely – emergency responders must have specific channels dedicated to those personnel participating in particular operations. These personnel must not be required to contend with the traffic of other users communicating about something other than the mission at hand.

Some believe that an alternative means of achieving interoperability would be for responders to scan through their radio channels in search of information that might be useful to them. This approach overlooks the fact that emergency responders generally must remain on their primary incident radio channel, or else risk losing critical messages related to command, control, and coordination.

As I said, achieving interoperability solutions really does depend on our ability to specifically anticipate the types of situations in which interoperable communications will be required. Since 9/11, the City has focused on defining these "interoperability requirements," and on tailoring interoperability initiatives to address them.

First Responder Interoperability

With respect to first responders, the City has made the determination that the optimal approach is to bring all users onto a common UHF frequency band; so that interoperability can be achieved among police officers, firefighters, and emergency medical technicians when the circumstances dictate that particular users from those forces must communicate with each other.

In this regard, in 2004, the FCC permanently allocated TV broadcast Channel 16 for the use of public safety communications by multiple City agencies, including the Police and Fire Departments, emergency medical services, and the Office of Emergency Management, as well as neighboring counties. The Channel 16 frequency band is used in various situations that require interoperable communications. These range from on-scene mission specific interoperable communications between walkie-talkies, to communications on a borough or City-wide basis among officials from different agencies, to communications on a regional basis.

Secondary Responder Interoperability

Next, I would like to outline how we have addressed secondary responder requirements for interoperable communications during major incidents. The City has implemented specialized talk groups on our Citywide 800 MHz system for 56 City, State, and regional agencies; 78 hospitals and healthcare facilities; and the commissioners of 44 City agencies.

Multi-Jurisdictional Interoperability

Let me now turn to multi-jurisdictional interoperability. In the aftermath of 9/11, the City established a regional Interoperability Communications Committee (known as the "ICC"). The ICC meets regularly to evaluate the current state of interoperable communications and to develop strategies for improving interoperability.

Finally, the City has deployed several TRP-1000 radio interconnection systems to provide interoperability during incidents that require communications among multiple City, State, regional, and Federal organizations using different radios and different frequencies. The ICC has established protocols for the deployment of TRP-1000s to support the tactical communications of these multi-jurisdictional agencies at a scene.

Other Interoperability Initiatives

I should emphasize that achieving interoperability is an ongoing process, rather than an "end state" that can ever be perfectly achieved. Obtaining adequate funding is, however, critical for these endeavors. I will describe below some of the interoperability projects the City is currently pursuing.

Tactical Interoperability Communications Plan

The City is in the process of finalizing its Tactical Interoperability Communications Plan which will be submitted to the Department of Homeland Security by May 1, 2006. This plan will document what interoperable communications resources are available within our urban area, and who controls each resource, as well as the rules and operational procedures for the appropriate use of each interoperable resource. The creation of this plan is a requirement of the Department of Homeland Security Office of Grants and Training 2005 Urban Area Security Initiative grant program. The City is fully compliant with the Department's requirements.

Implementation of 700 MHz

The City certainly appreciates the establishment of a firm date for transfer of the 700 MHz spectrum, as well as the Congressional allocation of $1 billion for interoperability contained in the Budget Reconciliation Bill recently signed by the President. Clearly, however, $1 billion when dispersed throughout the nation is not sufficient to fund optimal use of the 700 MHz spectrum, and we would urge you to consider expanding funding for this initiative. As you know, this spectrum was allocated to public safety with three main objectives: (1) to provide much needed additional public safety voice channels; (2) to improve regional interoperability; and (3) to allow for transmission of wideband data.

Citywide Wireless Network

The City is moving aggressively to deploy a state-of-the-art interoperable Citywide mobile broadband data network, which will provide emergency responders with data access to large file transfers, including maps, building layouts, and massive Federal and state anti-crime and anti-terrorism databases.

These networks will provide for downloads of full-motion video at emergency scenes, and continuous biological, chemical, nuclear, and radiological monitoring.

The transmission capability of this network will be the first of its kind and will literally transform the way in which officials respond to emergencies. Given the substantial public safety and national security components of the project, the City is pursuing federal funding to offset its costs, which will be several hundred million dollars.

With regard to funding, I would like to recommend that Congress consider establishing funds specifically for local governments. Ultimately, local governments are in the best position to determine their public safety needs and establish local first responder programs that can provide for interoperability based on the specific needs of the given area. I would also emphasize that some of the key criteria that should be applied in the allocation of funds should be level of risk, population concentration, and consequences associated with damage to critical economic and physical infrastructure.

Let me close by thanking you again for the opportunity to provide you with this overview of what the City has been doing to improve interoperability and our funding needs for these endeavors. I would be pleased to answer any questions you may have.